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U.S. Concern: Can the Victor Govern?

By Joanne Omang
Washington Post Staff Writer

Top administration decision-makers, equipped with an unusual degree of firsthand knowledge about the Philippines, are less concerned about who wins today's presidential election there than whether either candidate can deal with what comes next.

"Whoever wins emerges with the booby prize," one senior policy-maker said.

The handful of officials responsible for U.S. policy toward the Philippines have direct knowledge of its crumbling economy, its growing communist insurgency and its corrupt, truculent military establishment.

As a result, the policy-makers are "pretty coldblooded and neutral" about the election outcome, as one congressional source put it. Subordinates and outside observers agree that the officials are worried instead about whether U.S. interests in the Philippines—particularly two military bases there—can survive the turmoil they see coming no matter whether Ferdinand Marcos is reelected president or defeated by Corazon Aquino.

"The question is the process itself and whether the Filipino people think it's legitimate," the senior policy-maker said.

President Reagan has promised to consider increased U.S. aid if a credible election is followed by genuine reform, a position that officials

have stressed applies to both candidates.

Key players in the Philippine debate are Michael H. Armacost, undersecretary of state for political affairs, who was ambassador to the Philippines from 1982 to 1984; and Adm. William J. Crowe Jr., who was commander-in-chief of U.S. forces in the Pacific and Indian oceans from 1983 until he became chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in October.

Top intelligence officials for Asia have also served in the Philippines, while both Paul D. Wolfowitz, assistant secretary of state for Asian and Pacific affairs, and Stephen W. Bosworth, ambassador to the Philippines since April 1984, became chairmen of the State Department's policy planning council.

Crowe voiced concern as early as 1983 that corruption was weakening the Marcos government, permeating the armed forces and fueling guerrillas in the countryside, according to White House officials. His urgings that reform become a U.S. priority received much wider support after the assassination of Philippine opposition leader Benigno Aquino in September 1983.

That was a turning point for U.S. policy, as it was for the fractious Filipino opposition parties. Within a year, they had achieved a tenuous unity against Marcos, agreeing on little else. U.S. officials prodded them for another year toward the coalition now headed by Aquino's widow, Corazon, according to a sen-

ior policy adviser, "in order to get Marcos' attention" on the urgency of change. But knowledgeable officials insist that no U.S. government aid has gone to the political opposition.

A National Security Decision Directive in November 1984 set forth a U.S. policy of linking U.S. assistance to reforms, and officials said that policy remains in effect.

U.S. aid has been repackaged quietly to flow more through private voluntary organizations and less through government agencies, and a General Accounting Office team is in Manila probing allegations that aid was diverted to political uses.

Conditions were attached to food aid requiring changes in pricing and distribution, but major changes in state-run corporations and agricultural monopolies remain elusive, though considered fundamental to a rejuvenation of the economy.

Military reform has been just as elusive. Generals long past retirement age have been retained for political reasons, and a federal grand jury in Alexandria has been investigating charges that defense contractors provided kickbacks to Philippine government and military officials.

When Marcos ignored U.S. officials' advice and reinstated Gen. Fabian Ver as chief of the armed forces after his acquittal in the Aquino murder case, the action was regarded as an indicator that Marcos may no longer be in control of the army.

U.S. officials will be watching the army's role in today's election to determine whether to condemn or applaud the process. After the inevitable demonstrations subside, the verdicts of the citizens' watchdog group Namfrel and the Roman Catholic Church will be important, as will be the degree of coordination in both the Marcos and Aquino camps, officials said.

"That will help us understand how far down into the grassroots their organizations go" and how well they can resist guerrilla groups and muster support for new economic policies, one official said. Otherwise, "the communists will be taking over in three years, no matter who's president," he added.